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AUTHOR Keaveney, Madeline M.
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ABSTRACT

An important part of the task of an oral interpreter performing a piece of literature in translation is to deal with some of the difficulties inherent in the analysis and performance of such literature. The interpreter must examine the basic accuracy of the text; decide which of several translations to use in performance, choosing the one that best renders both the spirit and sense of the original text; be aware of what can be lost in translation, such as double meanings; realize what is seldom translatable, such as aberrations in punctuation or forms integral to comprehension of the message; and show what the original would have been like had it been conceived in English. (Extensive footnotes and illustrations are included.) (TJ)

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PROBLEMS IN THE ANALYSIS AND PERFORMANCE OF LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

Madeline M. Keaveney, Ph. D.
Cal. State University, Chico

No problem is as completely concordant with literature and with the modest mystery of literature as is the problem posed by a translation.[1]

What do Alain Robbe-Grillet, Herman Hesse, Rabindranath Tagore, and Gabriela Mistral have in common? They are all writers whose works are usually analyzed and performed in translation. Many times, the novice oral interpreter is only minimally aware that critical judgments about the speaker of a particular work,[2] or the significance of a critical phrase or passage may depend as much on the skill and sensitivity of the translator through whom the work is filtered as they do upon the actual work of the writer in question. Even the most rudimentary questions may remain unasked and unanswered. Is the translation reasonably accurate? Which translation (if there are several) best reflects the sense and spirit of the original? What seems to be lost in translation? Is there any way for the interpreter to compensate for translation losses?[3]

This paper will discuss these questions and suggest ways to minimize the difficulties inherent in the analysis and performance of literature in translation,[4] for the oral interpreter who performs only from literature written in English really ignores the brotherhood of writers, "the dead and the living

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of whatever culture or tongue," whose work " . . . taken together with all the poems native to English . . . gives a better sense of what the world community of poets is like."[5]

I

The oral interpreter's first undertaking should be an examination of the basic accuracy of the translation. With the aid of a reliable bilingual dictionary, the interpreter can ascertain whether the rendering of nouns, adjectives, and adverbs is reasonably accurate. A basic bilingual grammar can be used to check the accuracy of the meaning and tenses of the verbs. Obviously, this task requires some expertise in the language of the original text, although the oral interpreter need not feel irrevocably hindered if he/she is not fluent in this language; aid can often be obtained from a native speaker or an advanced student in the language.[6] Yet, even with the above-mentioned aids, the average oral interpreter should not expect to make a sophisticated comparison of texts.

However, the comparison of texts may be very rewarding. For example, a careful reading of the published English edition of Alain Robbe-Grillet's Le Voyeur[7] reveals a narrator who uses verb tenses idiosyncratically. Events in the present are usually told in a variety of past tenses; present tenses are used sparingly, to describe past events of great emotional importance, or imaginary or anticipated events. Thus, as

with an untranslated text, shifts in verb tenses often indicate shifts in the relative importance of events, and attention given to verb tenses can help the interpreter to gauge the veracity or importance of what is being narrated. An attentive comparison of the original and the published English translation of the following passage shows that the translation inadequately reflects the tight verb tense schema of the original. The French text reads:

> C'est déjà le tournant, et la borne blanche des deux kilomètres (A partir de cet endroit, il n'y a plus que mille six cents mètres jusqu'au hameau du grand phare. . . . [8]

The published English edition reads:

> He was at the crossroads already, and there was the white milestone (it was sixteen hundred yards to the big lighthouse. . . .) [9]

The present tenses in the French text should be translated by present tenses, not past tenses. Since past tenses are used in paragraphs preceding the cited sentence, the shift to the present tense in the French text indicates the narrator's mental shift as he approaches the spot where he committed a perverse sexual crime. To highlight the psychic importance of this spot, the English translation should read:

> He is already at the crossroads, and there is the white two kilometer marker. (It is no more than sixteen hundred meters to the big lighthouse. . .)[10]

Every comparison of texts will not reveal serious translation errors. However, such a comparison will assure the oral interpreter of the basic accuracy of the translation and

will, at the same time, give the oral interpreter a sense for the original text.[11]

II

If there are several translations of a text, the interpreter is faced with the difficult problem of deciding which translation to use in performance. When translations are widely divergent, this task may be quite frustrating. Yet, the oral interpreter will need to decide which translation best renders both the sense and spirit of the original text.

The following example serves as a case in point. Sections of three published translations of Gabriela Mistral's "La Extranjera"[12] are cited below and are noticeably divergent:

Version 1 - "Stranger"

so old it's as if she herself were dying,
She prays to a god with no volume and no weight.
She has sown cactus and claw-like grasses
in gardens of ours that she makes strange.
She draws her breath from the panting of the desert
and loves with a passion all that it whitens
ll 3-8

And some night when her suffering is greatest
from a death both silent and strange,
she is going to die right here among us
with nothing but her fate for a pillow."
ll 15-18[13]

Version 2 - "The Foreigner"

She prays to a god without form or weight,
and is so old she is ready to die.
In our garden which has become strange to us
she grows cactus and clawing grass.
She was nourished by breath of the desert
and loved with a scorching passion.
ll 4-9

And she will die among us
on a night when she suffers most,
only her fate for a pillow,
a death silent and foreign.
ll 16-19[14]

Version 3 - "The Stranger"

She prays to a formless, weightless God,
Aged, as if dying.
In our garden now so strange
She has planted cactus and alien grass.
The desert zephyr fills her with its breath
And she has loved with a fierce, white passion
ll 3-8

And she will die here in our midst
One night of utmost suffering,
With only her fate as a pillow,
And death, silent and strange.
ll 15-18[15]

Version 1 is the most wordy and often inaccurate translation of "La Extranjera." Version 3 is the most distant and abstract translation, due, in part, to the deletion of many of the pronouns and articles inherent in the Spanish verbs and text; although these pronouns and articles are implied in Version 3, Versions 1 and 2 seem more accurately to reflect the sense of the original in this regard. Version 2 is often more awkward than the other versions, because it occasionally sacrifices fluidity for accuracy. Also, only Version 2 accurately translates the forceful "extranjera" as foreigner, rather than just stranger. Thus, taking all factors into consideration, Version 2 is probably the best translation.

The above discussion merely highlights some of the differences in the translations of "La Extranjera." If the

interpreter cannot decide which translation most clearly reflects the totality of the original text, he/she may opt for performing several different versions of the text. Often, each translation captures something of the original and the attention given to the differences in translated versions can lead to an understanding which can enable the oral interpreter to make more fully founded choices in performance.[16]

III

An additional concern for the oral interpreter should be an awareness of what can be lost in translation, such as functional ambiguities and double meanings important in the original text; these may be inadequately rendered or destroyed in translation. In some cases, the oral interpreter's only recourse is to explain translation losses as part of his/her introduction. In other cases, the interpreter's performance can demonstrate what might otherwise be lost.

Look, for example, at Alain Robbe-Grillet's La Jalousie.[17] "Jalousie" means both "jealousy" and "slotted sunblind; Venetian shutter."[18] Although the word is never used in either the French or English texts to refer specifically to an emotional state, the presence of the ambiguous terms is a constant reminder of the tension of the jealous narrator who spies on his wife through the sunblinds. The oral interpreter may not, in performance, be able to communicate the verbal ambiguity of the French text, but he/she can suggest it in

performance. As the interpreter demonstrates sections where the narrator is spying through the sunblinds, he/she can do these actions with strongly suspicious vocal tones and facial expressions, thereby suggesting the multiple functions of "jalousie" in the original text.[19]

IV

Finally, the oral interpreter must realize what is seldom translatable. Abberations in punctuation, spelling, or capitalization or forms integral to the comprehension and appreciation of the message may not have formal equivalences in the receptor language. The succinct, elliptical use of words, in a language where prolixity and semantic ornamentation are normal, may also be meaningful. In addition, the rhythm and sounds of the original text may modulate the pace of the selection, thereby influencing the audience's perception of imagery, mood, characterization, and other important components of the text. It is these elements that contribute to the gestalt of the text, an aspect that is almost impossible to paraphrase or systematize.[20]

Doris Dana offers a possible way for partially compensating for some of those translation losses: " . . . I urge you to refer back to the original as much as possible, and to read it aloud even if you don't know Spanish. For the poem is also the sound, and that simply cannot be translated."[21]

Even if the audience does not understand the meaning of each of the words of the original text, performing all or part of the text in the original language, using somewhat stylized gestures and exaggerated facial expressions to show important shifts in tone of feeling, will allow the audience to perceive, at least in part, how the text sounds and feels in the original language.[22]

V

Ideally, the right translation "will not pre-empt the authority of the original but will show what the original would have been like had it been conceived in our own speech."[23] When the ideal is not attained, the oral interpreter can utilize several methods to compensate for losses accrued in the performance of translated literature. While checking the accuracy of the translation(s), the oral interpreter can also investigate the spirit of the original. He/she can carefully compare divergent translations and may opt for performing several versions of the original text to highlight translation differences. Finally, through judicious use of introductory material and the use of the original and translated texts in both analysis and performance, the oral interpreter can, at least partially, solve some of the problems inherent in the analysis and performance of literature in translation.

FOOTNOTES

[1]George Steiner, After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. xi.

[2]The terms "speaker" and "narrator" will be used interchangeably in this paper to mean the person in whom the point of view of the particular text in question is lodged.

[3]Although there are diverse linguistic positions on the possibility and problems of both intra- and interlingual translation, the universalist and monadist schools of thought represent dipolar views on the issue. Generally speaking, the universalist school believes that every language is translatable into every other language; although the universalist linguist probably would not suggest that every verbal text translates equally well into every language, he/she does essentially believe in the possibility of translation, given enough skill, time, and words. The monadist, on the other hand, while acknowledging various attempts at translation, is so aware of the dangers and difficulties inherent in any translation exercise that he/she essentially believes that full, viable translation is impossible, for since each language is different impelling and allowing us to think and feel in certain ways (Ibid., p. 74), any translation will almost always be a poor translation, one "full of apparently similar saying, but one which misses the bond of meaning." (Ibid., p. 64)

Which theory, if either, is correct is a moot point, for as Steiner so aptly puts it, "We do translate intra- and interlingually and have done so since the beginning of human history. The defense of translation has the immense advantage of abundant, vulgar fact." (Ibid., p. 250). And, as Eugene A. Nida puts it in "A Framework for the Analysis and Evaluation of Theories of Translation" in Translation/Applications and Research, edited by Richard W. Brislin (New York: Gardner Press, Inc., 1976), "If one is to insist that translation must involve no loss of information whatsoever, then obviously not only translating but all communication is impossible." (p. 63)

For further investigation of some of the philosophical questions posed by translation see Paul Watzlawick, How Real is Real (New York: Random House, 1976); Ronald A. Knox, On English Translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957); Paul Selver, The Art of Translating Poetry (Boston: The Writer, Inc., 1966); J. Casagrand, "The Ends of Translation,"

International Journal of American Linguistics (1954, 20, pp. 335-340); Reuben A. Brower, ed., On Translation (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1959). Particular attention should be also given to the Brislin exts, cited above, for both its articles and excellent bibliography, and to the text and excellent bibliography in Steiner's After Babel.

[4]This paper will be limited to a discussion of the problems encountered in trying to perform translated literature originally written in Western languages, such as French and Spanish. It will not attempt to deal with those important translation losses that occur between cultures. As Steiner suggests, "Different cultures impose a different Gestalt on the same raw material and total aggregate of experience." (P. 86). And, as Lawrence Grossberg suggests in "Conceptions of Language and the Study of Communication" (unpublished paper first presented at the "Translation and Poetic Conference," Indiana State University at Terre Haute, April 3, 1976), " . . . there is always an unbridgeable gap, an inevitable distance from the original since two languages never show the same world--they are each the retrieval or reclamation of different traditions. Translation must always involve a compromise, therefore, not only of the original language but also of the language into which the original is translated. If a translation is to work, it must attempt to bring the world of the text into a new language." (pp. 34-35). This topic of inter- and intracultural translation deserves extensive treatment in and of itself.

Nor will this paper attempt to deal with the problems encountered when one is dealing with literature translated from a non-Western language, such as Chinese, whose ideographic alphabet, coupled with the tonal nuances of the spoken language, makes the process of translation, even for sense, very difficult.

Finally, this paper will not attempt to discuss the myriad problems involved in the translation of essentially "oral" literature, such as tribal legens, that were or are intended to be presented orally and are then transcribed into English; often, a substantial part of the meaning of the literature will come not only from the actual words used but will also include the costumes, props, and performance occasion for the "text."

[5]Jacob Drachler and Virginia R. Terris, ed., The Many Worlds of Poetry (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 289. Although their statement applies specifically to poetry, the same might be said for all literature in translation.

[6]Careful dictionary and grammar work, along with some coaching from a native reader and speaker, will be an invaluable aid to the English-speaking student wishing to become sensitive to a text originally written in another language.

However, there really is no totally adequate substitute for an ear sensitive to language sounds and some personal knowledge and expertise in the language in questions. With the ever increasing number of poems, novels, plays, and stories presented to the English reader in translated form, the need for some working knowledge of some language other than English becomes crucial to the serious, sensitive oral interpreter. In fact, this need may well be a renewed call and rationale for the serious study of foreign languages, for both reading and speaking skills.

[7](Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1955). The English edition, translated by Richard Howard, appears under the title The Voyeur (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958).

[8]Le Voyeur, p. 87.

[9]The Voyeur, p. 71.

[10]It must be noted here that this example seems to be one of the few places where there is a momentary lapse by Howard in an otherwise excellent translation.

[11]For further discussion of the verb tense schema in Alain Robbe-Grillet's Le Voyeur, see Madeline M. Keaveney's Narrative Viewpoint in Two Novels by Alain Robbe-Grillet (unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Illinois: Urbana-Champaign, 1972), pp. 92-103.

[12]Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral. Translation and editing by Doris Dana (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 100. The entire poem reads as follows:

--Habla con dejo de sus mares bárbaros
con no sé qué algas y no sé qué arenas;
reza oración a dios sin bulto y peso,
envejecida como si muriera.
En huerto nuestro que no hizo entraño,
ha puesto cactus y zarpadas hierbas.
Alienta del resuello del desierto
y ha amado con pasión de que blanquea,
que nunca cuenta y que si nos contaso
sería como el mapa de otra estrella.
Vivirá entre nosotros ochenta años,
pero siempre será como si llega,
hablando lengua que jadea y gime
y que le entienden solo bestezuelas.

Y va a morirse en medio de nosotros,
en una noche en la que mas padezca,
con solo su destino por almohada,
de una muerte callada y extranjera.

[13]Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral. Translated by Langston Hughes (1962), pp. 109-110. Reprinted by permission of Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana. The entire translation reads as follows:

"She speaks in a slight accent about her wild seas
with God knows what seaweeds and God knows what sands;
so old it's as if she herself were dying,
she prays to a god with no volume and no weight.
She has sown cactus and claw-like grasses
in gardens of ours that she makes strange.
She draws her breath from the panting of the desert
and loves with a passion all that it whitens,
all that never says anything and if it should
it would be like the map of another planet.
Were she to live in our midst for eighty years
it would be always as though she had just come,
speaking in a language that pants and moans
and that is understood only by beasts.
And some night when her suffering is greatest
from a death both silent and strange,
she is going to die right here among us
with nothing but her fate for a pillow."

[14]This version is translated by Doris Dana, p. 101. The entire translation reads as follows:

She speaks with the moisture of her barbarous seas
still on her tongue, with the taste
of sands and algae unknown to me.
She prays to a god without form or weight,
and is so old she is ready to die.
In our garden which has become strange to us
she grows cactus and clawing grass.
She was nourished by breath of the desert
and loved with a scorching passion
she never tells. If she told us,
it would be like the map of another star.
She will live with us eighty years,
always as if just arriving,
speaking a language that pants and moans
and that only little beasts understand.
And she will die among us
on a night when she suffers most,
only her fate for a pillow,
a death silent and foreign.

[15]Reprinted by permission of New York University Press from Gabriela Mistral: The Poet and Her Work by Margot Arce de Vazquez, translated by Helen Masslo Anderson, © 1964 by New York University, p. 13. The entire translation reads as follows:

> She speaks in her way of her savage seas
> with unknown algae and unknown sands;
> She prays to a formless, weightless God,
> Aged, as if dying.
> In our garden now so strange,
> She has planted cactus and alien grass.
> The desert zephyr fills her with its breath
> And she loved with a fierce, white passion
> She never speaks of, for if she were to tell
> It would be like the face of unknown stars.
> Among us she may live for eighty years,
> Yet always as if newly come,
> Speaking a tongue that pants and whines
> Only by tiny creatures understood.
> And she will die here in our midst
> One night of utmost suffering,
> With only her fate as a pillow,
> And death, silent and strange.

[16]I am greatly indebted to Ms. Margaret Riffel, a former student, who helped track down several translations of "La Extranjera" and who helped to highlight some of the differences in the translated texts. In addition, I am indebted to Ms. Maria Barajas, another former student, for helping me to get a firmer grasp of the sense and spirit of the poem in Spanish.

[17](Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1957).

[18]Cassell's New French Dictionary. Edited by Denis Girard (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968), p. 434.

[19]A further example from La Jalousie shows the additional difficulty of adequately translating passages containing audal ambiguities, such as the following:

> Le phrase se terminait par "savoir attendre" ou "à quoi s'attendre" ou "la voir se rendre," "là dans sa chambre," "le noir y chante" ou n'importe quoi. (p. 193).

Howard's translation reads:

> His sentence ends in "take apart" or "break apart" or "break a heart" or "heart of darkness," or something

lf the kind. (Jealousy, published in New York by Grove Press, in 1965), p. 126.

Howard's translation communicates the audal ambiguities; in addition, however, it has resonances and a degree of logical connectiveness among the phrases that is more substantial than in the French. Through performances, that is, by emphasizing the narrator's confusion in hearing, via facial expressions and hesitant vocal tones, and perhaps by using the hands and arms in offhanded gestures, the oral interpreter can both demonstrate the audal ambiguities and the lack of substantive connections among phrases.

Again, it should be noted that this is one of the few places where Howard's translation slightly exceeds the seeming intent of the original. In several other places in the novel (page 26 in the French, page 47 in the English edition), for example, the audal ambiguities do seem to translate well into English.

[20]The degree of loss of the intangible elements in a text may well depend upon the methodology of the translator. If the translator chooses to metaphrase, i.e., render a word for word translation, the information in the text will probably be communicated but the "dance" of the text may well be lost. If, on the other hand, the translator chooses to be an imitator, placing particular stress on retaining as much as possible of the aura of the original, he/she will vary words, and perhaps sense, as he/she sees fit. George Steiner seems to suggest that either of these two methods has both strengths and weaknesses.

The interested reader is directed, again, to Steiner for further discussion of the role of the translator as well as to Casagrande's discussion of the four "ends" of translation. Also, Lila Ray's article on "Multi-Dimension Translation: Poetry", in the Brislin text, is particularly insightful; a theorist and translator, Ms. Ray discusses various approaches she uses when translating poetry.

[21]Selected Poems, p. xxvii. Even though this comment pertains directly to poems written in Spanish, the principle discussed is germane to performances of literature in other langauges.

[22]Obviously, the oral interpreter who has no ear for languages and has no idea how to pronounce the words of a text in a foreign language should not attempt to perform the text in the original language; he/she will have to be satisfied with performing the English version (s). However, for the student who has had at least a basic class where pronunciation

was a component of the class or has access to a native speaker, the possibility of performing the text in the original language is not out of the question.

He/she must carefully discover, either by means of a pronunciation guide or by consultation, how each of the words in the original language is pronounced. Assuming that the oral interpreter, with some practice, understands what the words mean and how the tone and emotions of the selection operate, the oral interpreter can perform the text in the original language, usually with some moderate degree of success. Attempting to perform the text in the original language will require practice, with particular attention paid to the relationship between sound and sense. However, any serious oral interpretation performance should be preceded by similar efforts.

[23]Steiner, p. 256.